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معهد السياسات العامة  
Institute for Public Policies

## **The Crisis of the Palestinian Political Scene**

### **A Contribution in looking for an outlet**

Outputs of 4 workshops (Ramallah- Gaza)

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## Executive Summary

In the speech Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas gave on November 5, 2009 he announced that he would not run again in the Palestinian presidential elections. This can be viewed as a decisive crossroads in the political process within the region. Despite the impact of his declaration on all sides, the real transformation does not lie in the declaration itself. Abu Mazen has been known for his moderate line and political courage throughout the course of the peace process which has lasted for almost two decades now. He was clear when he said the negotiation process had been exhausted and set the condition of a settlement-halt before any resumption of negotiations could take place. Abu Mazen possessed the courage to take responsibility for stating that negotiations leading to a Palestinian state cannot continue under the current conditions. The President did not use big words or slogans. On the contrary, he was clear and straightforward in his diagnosis of the present crisis: settlements constitute an obstacle on the path of the peace process and negotiations cannot proceed while settlements continue to be expanded.

He made the right diagnosis and hit the target when he declared in his speech that the goal of the Palestinian struggle in the next phase was to reject further settlement-activities because they constitute a violation of international law and consolidate the irreversibility of Israeli presence in the West Bank.

Abu Mazen had been extremely patient and gave every chance to various interventions seeking to exert pressure on Israel to halt its settlement activities, so that the negotiations process could resume. While it is true that settlements have existed since the start of the peace process and the launch of the Madrid Process in 1991, in the past, Palestinians have not linked the resumption or continuation of negotiations to the settlement-issue. Their insistence on pushing negotiations forward was driven mainly by the need and desire to achieve progress in the peace process. However, when negotiations start to harm the vital interests of the Palestinian people and the realities on the ground seem to foil negotiations about a future Palestinian state, there is a need to review positions.

The retreat in the US position on settlements was the straw that broke the camel's back. The Palestinian leadership realized that matters were not moving in the right direction. In the beginning, the new Obama Administration had taken a firm and determined stance on the issue of Israeli settlement activities, especially in Jerusalem. This has encouraged the Palestinian leadership to prioritize resistance against settlements and to mobilize all means available in exposing the dangers that settlements pose to the peace process. Later, the US Administration retreated from its position and matters returned to square one with settlements seemingly no longer an obstacle to peace for the Americans. Maybe this had to do with the internal politics in the United States and the influence of lobbying groups. Still, Palestinians concluded that they could not count on anything.

The inevitable result of negotiations must be the establishment of the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital and protection of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people – especially their right of return to their homeland. Thus, negotiations are nothing more than one form of legitimate struggle to regain our rights and when this method leads nowhere, there is a need to reconsider that process.

This was not the only reason pushing the Palestinian President to declare his intention not to run again for the Presidency. Internal conditions and the stalemate in the national dialogue process also had an impact on his decision. Abu Mazen has worked hard to make the national dialogue succeed and he agreed without hesitation to the Egyptian proposal for reconciliation (what is now called the Egyptian paper), but this was met by harsh rejection from Hamas that refused to sign the paper and demanded amendments to it. Abu Mazen wanted to end the internal split and re-unify the PNA institutions. He wanted to see concurrent presidential and

legislative elections in order to end the state of political and institutional chaos but this is no longer possible now, at least not in the short term.

Moreover, Abbas' position was not being backed sufficiently as many Arab countries showed less than adequate support to the Palestinian President. In the case of the Goldstone Report, Arab countries agreed to delay voting on the report by this eminent, international judge and some launched personal attacks criticizing Abu Mazen for making settlement activities a major issue; in other words, Arab support for Palestinian political issues began to retreat.

There are dozens of reasons behind the decision of President Abbas not to run a second time in the presidential elections. One can also list dozens of other reasons behind the deadlock in the peace process but clearly there is a new Palestinian political agenda that requires consideration in order to study its prospects and the possible impact on the stalled negotiations.

Abu Mazen's eight points, from a Palestinian perspective, must form the compass for the political project in the region. According to Abu Mazen, achieving the two state solution is still possible under the condition that the following principles and terms of reference are applied:

- 1- The basis of negotiations are the two state vision on the basis of the relevant UN resolutions (most of all UN Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and 1515), the Road Map and the Arab Peace Initiative as well as the results of the negotiations that took place in Camp David, Taba and Annapolis.
- 2- Future borders are based on the situation that existed prior to June 4, 1967 with the possibility of conducting land exchange of equal value without prejudicing water rights or the geographical contiguity between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
- 3- East Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinian state and freedom of access to the holy sites is guaranteed.
- 4- A just and agreed upon solution to the cause of Palestinian refugees as mentioned in the Arab Peace Initiative is crucial.
- 5- Israeli settlements on the lands of the Palestinian state are illegitimate and treated likewise.
- 6- Border security arrangements between the states of Palestine and Israel will be provided by a third party.
- 7- Any solution to the issue of water rights is based on international law and the right of the Palestinian state to control its water resources and to seek regional cooperation on the issue of water.
- 8- The release of all Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

No one really knows what the future approach of the Palestinian leadership will be as more than one option has been talked about, but the only certainty is a tendency to expand the front of confrontation with Israel and take the crisis to the international level by lobbying the relevant international organizations which have the power to decide on the borders of a future Palestinian state and on other issues which have been suspended for some time, such as the Advisory Opinion of the ICJ on the Wall and the Goldstone Report. Other circles inside the Palestinian leadership have also talked about expanding the front of popular struggle in a way similar to the protest marches in Ni'lin and Bil'in. Other strategies are being discussed as well.

In order to explore the reasons and ramifications of President Abbas' decision, his recent positions and the eight points that he set out as conditions for returning to negotiations, the Institute for Public Policies held four workshops – two in Ramallah (21-22, November 2009) and two in Gaza (22-23, November 2009). Sixty researchers, university professors and political activists were invited to take part in brainstorming sessions on several themes:

- 1- Reasons and implications of the decision of President Abu Mazen not to run in any future presidential elections; the local, regional and international ramifications of such a decision and the options Palestinians face.

- 2- Revision of the peace process; the current stalemate and Israeli positions; the impact of the partisan map in Israel; the influence of the right wing in the Israeli government.
- 3- The scope of the retreat in US positions and the background to this development; opportunities to influence the US decision and the impact of internal conditions in the United States on the foreign policies of US President Obama; the European and Arab positions.
- 4- The future of the Palestinian political system; the decision to approach international organizations to have them demarcate the borders of the Palestinian state; the chance of success with such an approach and its rationale; the future of the PNA after the deadlock in the reconciliation process.

Following a long and serious discussion accompanied by scientific analysis, the participants presented a set of recommendations and conclusions that can be useful to decision makers in guiding the Palestinian agenda in the right direction over the next phase.

The first chapter of this paper summarizes the overall discussions that took place in the four workshops, and contains a summary of the discussion on each of the four points presented for discussion. The second chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations mentioned in the interventions and comments of the participants on many of the issues that were addressed. These include both general topics and some specific points. Some points refer to the situation in Israel while others dealt with the popular struggle, the future of the PNA and the PLO, the internal dialogue, the role of the Fatah Movement, the Arab situation and the relations with the United States.

The Institute for Public Policies expresses its sincere gratitude to all workshop participants for their views and ideas and for the serious commitment they gave to the discussions. The ideas and views from discussions presented in this summary paper do not necessarily reflect the position of the Institute. The purpose of the workshops was to provide ideas and advice to those decision makers who can make use of these findings and build upon them.

Since President Abu Mazen's speech and his eight points, a lot has happened behind the scenes. Nevertheless, the Palestinian political situation, internally and in relation to external issues has remained constant. Settlements – unlike negotiations – have not been halted. There has been no progress in advancing Palestinian issues in the international arena. Two months after Abu Mazen's decision, Palestinians have not achieved any progress in any direction. As for the international community, it is in no better shape. The United States and the Obama-Administration have not moved to rectify their position. The only welcome ray of light was the one coming from Brussels when the Swedish Presidency of the EU presented its proposal to recognize a Palestinian state within the borders of June 4, 1967 with Jerusalem as its capital. However, the different considerations, factors and balances within Brussels coupled with the decision making mechanisms of EU institutions led to a reduction in the breadth of the original decision. Still, it signifies progress when compared with former positions of the EU.

There has been little change in the Palestinian internal situation: the Egyptian document still awaits signing and calls for dialogue are no longer heeded, as if no one is interested in dialogue.

Via workshops in Ramallah and Gaza, the Institute for Public Policies attempted to explore the views of a large sector of experts and interested people and to discuss the reasons and ramifications of Abu Mazen's position. The point of the workshops was to present their recommendations and deliberations to decision makers. Interesting discussions took place and the participants presented important recommendations that can be summarized thus:

- 1: Palestinians cannot back away from their position under any pretext or partial concessions that Israel might make because this would be an attempt to transform the Palestinian position into an empty meaningless approach.

2: We need to act quickly and press the international institutions to demarcate the borders of the state and submit the various cases for doing so. In addition, we must activate the case on Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people in such a way that it leads to punishment of the perpetrators and deters Israel from maintaining its siege on the Palestinian people and from confiscating Palestinian lands.

3: There is a need for an intensive diplomatic campaign to expose Israeli measures in the West Bank and the siege of Gaza, and to clarify the dangers of settlements on the peace process.

4: Such moves and campaigns need to be accompanied by popular struggle against settlements, the wall, the checkpoints and the siege.

5: In order for these efforts to succeed, there is a need to continue with the national dialogue process and reach a comprehensive national reconciliation that will move the homeland away from a state of fragmentation and schism.

6: The Palestinian masses inside the Green Line and throughout the Diaspora need to be mobilized in the battle to achieve independence.

7: The Palestinian people need the support and solidarity of their Arab brethren and of international forces and activists committed to peace.

8: In order to achieve success, Palestinians must stop random and unplanned political reactions and moves. Instead action-based plans and programs need to be prioritized and "think tanks" as well as "crisis management cells" must be activated.

Certainly, the next phase will not be easy, in light of the intransigence of an Israeli government led by a hawkish right wing alliance which does not take the peace process seriously. Moreover, it appears that the US Administration will be slow to engage in efforts to halt settlement-activities for fear of failure, embarrassment or because of internal pressures. Palestinians have a lot to do if they wish to keep and maintain their dream of establishing an independent state. Abu Mazen has affirmed that the Palestinian state and the two state solution are still possible along the lines of the points he outlined in his speech, and this must become the basis of the Palestinian peace project.

Thus, Palestinians must give more priority to their internal front and attempt to reunite so that we are capable of confronting future challenges.